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ABSTRACT

There are many compelling reasons for introducing foreign language study at the middle school level. Adolescents are initiating new and higher levels of cognitive processing, their curiosity is high, and they are concerned with intellectual, philosophical, biological, sociological, moral, and ethical issues. A survey of 82 middle school foreign language programs in Georgia investigated the characteristics of the schools, program teachers and administrators, program design and content, language enrollment as a percentage of overall enrollment, instructional materials, curriculum design and emphases, and grading practices. Analysis of survey responses by school principals and program teachers revealed the following: a high percentage of teachers had specialist degrees (unspecified); many teachers had substantial years of experience; the most common program design is exploratory instruction for 6 weeks; while many programs report using texts, these are most likely high school texts, which may be inappropriate; it appears that many teachers write the curricula themselves; and language learning expectations are high despite short time periods assigned to language study. Compiled responses are presented and the 21-item questionnaire is appended. (MSE)

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ED 365 115

Foreign Language Study in Georgia Middle Schools

Michael G. Allen & David Alley

Introduction

Global education is one of many current activities in public education today (Global Education, 1991). That our world is "smaller" due to the globalization of national economies and as the result of instant world-wide communication through the use of satellites and availability of real-time transmission of information is axiomatic. Global education is one response to such mind boggling realities.

An important component of any educational effort to globalize American education is the integration of cross-cultural studies into the curriculum. And, an important aspect of such efforts is foreign language student. From 1986 to 1991 enrollments in foreign language study in Georgia's middle grades schools increased by almost 80% (Comparative Data, 1992). Nationwide, the growth in middle school foreign language programs has surpassed similar, impressive growth at the secondary level.

Despite this increase in enrollments, little is known about the objectives, organization, and evaluation of these new middle school programs. In Georgia, like most states, more is known about how many students are enrolled in foreign language study, than about what it is they actually study.

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Characteristics of the Age Group and Appropriateness of Foreign Language Study

There are many compelling reasons for introducing foreign languages at the middle grades level. The intellectual development characteristics of early adolescence best describe why these youngsters are both interested in and capable of studying a foreign language successfully.

Briefly, the intellectual nature of young adolescents is changing in fairly dramatic ways (This We Believe, 1992). Many youngsters are "initiating new and higher level(s) of cognitive process(ing) because of brain growth..." (This We Believe, p. 11). Thinking skills initiated earlier in the schooling process are refined, with or without instructional support, and usually result in "consolidation, refinement, and maturation of (those) thinking skills..." (This We Believe, p. 12).

Early adolescents' curiosity remains unbounded and they thoroughly enjoy both intellectual and manipulative activities in the classroom. They exhibit a strong preference for active involvement over passive recipiency. A singular lack of intellectual inhibition and need for learning related to immediate personal goals and interests also mark the age group.

Finally, foreign language study is a worthy intellectual pursuit for early adolescents because "In their search for identity...(they) seek to understand the meaning (Believe, p. 12). And in spite of adult opinions and perceptions to the contrary these youngsters are "concerned with intellectual, philosophical, biological, sociological, moral, and ethical issues" (This We Believe, p. 12).

The time period of early adolescence is an excellent one for initiating foreign language study. Such efforts can reap great intellectual, social and cultural

rewards. Given the global context of life today, foreign language study at the middle grades level is an important component of acclimatizing students to this pressing reality.

OPTIONS FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY AT THE MIDDLE LEVEL

Before initiating a middle school foreign language study program a number of questions must be posed and answered. Which language or languages will be studies? What will be the length of time devoted to language study? How will students be evaluated? Regardless of the language selected, time studied and evaluation procedures used, each foreign language program must somehow fit into the extant middle school curriculum.

The National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Languages recommends three options for foreign language study at the middle grades level (Middle School Foreign Languages: A Planning Guide, 1989). These options include exploratory courses, regular first year foreign language courses and a combination of these two.

Exploratory language courses provide a short-term introduction to language study which permit middle grades students to sample a variety of languages prior to a regular course sequence in a single language. Exploratory language courses are usually scheduled for periods of six, nine, twelve or eighteen weeks. Following one of these schedules, three languages (French, German and Spanish for example) may be presented over the course of one academic year. And, while they may contain some linguistic content, exploratory language courses usually focus on the target language culture as well as cultural diversity within the United States.

Another option for middle grades foreign language study is the adaptation of

regular first-year courses in a single language to a two year program. This arrangement primarily focuses on the goals of linguistic proficiency while the slower pace and numerous enrichment activities lay the foundation for continued study at the high school level. Due to this close link with high school language study, these programs are normally concentrated at the seventh and eighth grade levels.

The third option is perhaps the ideal arrangement for middle grades foreign language study in that it combines exploratory courses whose emphasis is largely cultural with first-year language study in which the emphasis is primarily linguistic. Under such an arrangement, students in the fifth and sixth grades would study a variety of languages in exploratory courses and then focus on a single language for the next two years. The student who completes a program of this design would then be adequately prepared for second-year language study as a ninth grader.

THE SURVEY

In an effort to better understand the choices made by Georgia's middle grades schools, a survey was conducted in the Spring of 1992. Of the 295 surveys mailed, 106 were returned for a 36% response rate. These 106 respondents represented 82 different programs. Respondents were either the school principal of the foreign language teacher. A complete copy of the survey may be found in Appendix I.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

Data from the completed surveys were compiled in "semi-table" form based on each item on the questionnaire. These data are reported below with an attendant narrative discussion. Data are based on an "N" of 82 and are reported both by number and in some cases by percentages.

The Survey

1. Grade levels represented in schools in the survey

6 - 8 = 66		4 - 6 = 1	
7 - 8 = 6		6 = 1	
6 - 7 = 4		7 = 1	
5 - 7 = 1		8 = 1	
4-12 = 1		N = 82	

2. Race of person completing survey.

African American	= 17
Caucasian	= 62
Hispanic	= 2
Native American	= 1
N	= 82

3. Sex: Male = 3 Female = 49 N = 82

4. Highest academic degree of respondents.

Baccalaureate	= 18
Masters	= 21
Specialist	= 36
Doctorate	= 8
N	= 82

5. Years of teaching experience of respondents.

0-2 = 11

3-5 = 6

6-8 = 5

9-10 = 1

10+ = 59

N = 82

6. Foreign language(s) studied in respondents' schools.

Spanish	= 74	Usual combinations include:
French	= 52	French & Spanish
German	= 20	French, Spanish & German
Latin	= 16	French & Spanish (5th-6th grades) &
Chinese	= 1	German & Latin (7-8th grades)
Japanese	= 1	
Russian	= 1	
N	= 82	

7. Integration of foreign language program into school curriculum.

Core curriculum: 8

Exploratory curriculum: 74

Other (gifted program): 2 (multiple response)

N = 82

8. Length of time of foreign language study. (multiple response)

6 weeks = 48

9 weeks = 18

1/2 year = 7

1/1 year = 14

Other = 3 (range, by grade of 4-1/2 to 12 weeks)

N = 82

10. When foreign language study is optional, the % of student body that studies a language.

The range is 1% to 90%. Mean is 50.84%.

11. Grade levels at which foreign language is studied.

Grade	4	5	6	7	8	9	no response
Numbe	2	3	58	69	64	1	1

12. Days per week of foreign language instruction.

Days per week	1	2	3	4	5	no response
Number	0	3	2	0	76	1

N = 82

13. Number of minutes per class period of foreign language instruction.

# of minutes	10	30-35	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-60	110	NR
Number	1	3	2	35	26	13	1	1

N = 82

14. Teaching station situation of respondents.

Own classroom = 60

Itinerant by building = 18

Other (floater by building or by county-wide) = 3

No response = 1

N = 82

15. Text material(s) used in foreign language programs.

Student texts	= 17
Teacher handouts	= 20
Other* (combo of texts & handouts)	= 44
No response	= 1
N	= 82

16. Written foreign language curriculum.

YES = 56 NO = 26

17. Individual(s) who wrote the written foreign language curriculum.

Individual teacher	23
County teacher	13
Foreign Language staff	8
Exploratory Committee	4
Curriculum Director	3
State curriculum	3
Assist. Super for C&I	1
County Specialists	1
QCC	1
Textbook curriculum	1
No response	24
N =	82

18. Emphasis in the foreign language programs in the report.

a. Emphasis on cultural understanding...: 34

b. Emphasis on language learning...: 25

c. Both of the above: 22

d. No response 1

N = 82

19. Evaluation of student performance in foreign language programs.

Not graded = 1

Graded = 81

20. How student grades are reported.

a. S/U = 2

b. Standard letter grades = 80

N = 82

21. How grades are reported to parents.

a. Report Card = 81

b. Other* = 1

N = 82

*One school reported it graded students in foreign language studies but did not report the grade in any way.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

A number of data caught our attention. First of all, we were impressed by the high percentage of teachers with specialist degrees. We are unsure whether this means the ED.S. degree of simply a foreign language degree, but the percentage is quite high. We were also struck by the number of years of experience that teachers had: 72% reported over 10 years experience. Both these

data seem to indicate that there are highly qualified educators in these foreign language classes. The question to be raised, however, is whether their qualification are appropriate to foreign language teaching.

It seems that the most common arrangement is for exploratory programming lasting six weeks. Most programs seem to begin in sixth grade and continue through seventh and eight. A question occurs to us, is if students studies six weeks of French in the sixth grade, what do they study in the seventh and eighth grade? In other words, what amount of repetition between grade levels occurs in foreign language study in Georgia middle grades schools?

In reference to Question 15, we notice that a large number of programs report using texts. Our question is, what texts are being used since, to our knowledge, no middle grades foreign language text has been published within the past 30 years. Our working assumption is that teachers are using high school texts for these classes and, further, given the heavy emphasis on the exploratory course delivery vehicle, the linguistic emphasis found in such texts may be all wrong for such courses.

We found the "no responses" to Question 17 intriguing. With no one specifically responsible for writing the foreign language curriculum our "guess" is that this indicates that many programs are working without a written curriculum. Additionally, the fact that 44% of respondents reported that teachers write the curriculum indicates that a foreign language teacher may expect responsibilities far beyond those normally given to other middle grades teachers. This is important to note due to the large number of beginning teachers currently being recruited into these programs.

Finally, the responses to Question 18 indicate that despite the short time

period assigned to language study, language l;earning expectations are high. To be honest six weeks is a very short time indeed to accomplish many concrete linguistic objectives. Interestingly, one of the faults of the foreign language programs of the 1960's were the unrealistic expectations of the program. This may be happening again.

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN THE MIDDLE GRADES SURVEY

Circle the correct response

1. Grade levels represented in your school organization (circle the appropriate grades).

   4 5 6 7 8 9 (other:_____)

For the person completing this survey:

2. Your race:

   a. African American c. Caucasian e. Native American

   b. Asian d. Hispanic f. Other:_____

3. Sex: Male Female

4. What is the highest academic degree you have attained?

   a. Baccalaureate c. Specialist (sixth year)

   b. Master d. Doctorate

5. How many years have you been teaching?

   a. 0-2 c. 6-8 e. more than 10

   b. 3-5 d. 9-10

6. Which foreign language(s) is studied in your program?

   a. French b. Spanish c. Other:_____

7. How is the foreign language program integrated into the school curriculum?

   a. in the Core c. Other: (briefly describe)

   b. in the Exploratory

8. How long do students study foreign language?

   a. 6 weeks c. Half year e. Other:_____

   b. 9 weeks d. Full year

9. Is foreign language study optional or required?

   a. optional b. required

10. If optional, what percentage of students study a foreign language?

    Percentage:_____

11. At what grade level(s) is foreign language studied?

    a. Grade(s) 4 5 6 7 8 9

12. How many days per week do foreign language classes meet?

    a. Number of days per weeks:_____

13. How long is each class period of foreign language study?

    a. Number of minutes per class period:_____

14. Which best describes the foreign language teacher situation?

    a. Have own classroom c. Itinerant by county

    b. Itinerant by building d. Other:_____

15. What text materials are used to support instruction?

    a. Individual student text c. Other:_____

    b. handouts prepared by teacher _____

16. Is there a written curriculum for the foreign language program?

    YES NO

17. If yes, who wrote the curriculum?_____

18. Which statement most accurately describes your foreign language program?

    a. Emphasis on cultural understanding (e.g. information about customs, food, and history of the country).

    b. Emphasis on language learning (e.g. learning to understand and speak the language).

19. How are students evaluated in foreign language classes?

    a. not graded b. graded

20. If graded, how? a. S/U b. standard letter grades

21. How are grades in foreign language classes reported to parents?

    a. by Report Card b. If not by Report Card, how?